

Like waiting for the gunshot at a relay race, HM2(FMF) Dan Garner waits patiently for the sun to set. Moving now could mean being seen and caught before the night even begins.

Since when has a Sailor been in his element trekking through the desert? Since Sailors do this while training at Naval Air Facility, El Centro, Calif. Their mission: to experience and practice survival and evasion techniques in a simulated desert combat environment using current survival equipment. The school is Desert Environment Survival Training (DEST), and All Hands sent PH2 Aaron Ansarov to go through it. His mission: he techniques it takes to survive.

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Top — One of the students found himself a new friend while preparing his shelter. In a real-life survival situation, this scorpion would make a tasty meal. “You just put it in your mouth and bite below the stinger,” said one of the students.

Above — HM2(FMF) Dan Garner takes a quick breather after spending a good two hours on his desert shade shelter. For it to work properly, the hole should be at least a foot deep, and the thin sheets of parachute should also be separated to keep a good air flow.

Right — HM2 (FMF) Dan Garner (foreground) and the rest of the DEST class are in high-risk job fields that require having this training like pilots, SEALs, Marines, and combat crewmen.

DAY ONE — MONDAY

5:45 A.M. — Arrived at Fleet Aviation Specialized Operation (FASO) headquarters at Naval Air Station North Island. I walk in the classroom, backpack in hand and camera belt on waste. The other 24 Sailors going through the class give me a funny look. “You’re going to carry all that,” says one of the other students as I unsnap my camera belt and sit down at the table. “Yep!” I reply excitedly. “I’m going through as a student and doing a story on this class.”

“Good luck,” he says as he chuckles and walks away, glancing back at my 25 pounds of gear.

“It’s pretty light,” I think to myself, “But what else can I get rid of? All I packed was extra shirts, socks, toothbrush, space blanket, knife, sunglasses, flashlight and camel back full of water. Then there’s the camera gear: one camera body, four lenses, flash and a bag of film. I take a look around the classroom and notice I stand out like the one-legged man in a kicking contest.

I’m in a room filled with pilots, SEALs, Soft Water Combat Crewmen and others whose survival in the field may rely on what they are about to learn in the next week.

6:15 A.M. — An instructor walks in the room with list in hand and pairs us off into navigation teams of two. “PH2 Aaron Ansarov and HM2 Dan Garner, you guys are NavTeam Delta 2.” I get up and move to where Garner is sitting and introduce myself. He gives me a quick look over.

“Have you done this before?” he asks with a curious look on his face.

“Nope,” I reply as the curiosity engulfs my thoughts.

I wait for him to say good luck like the other people. He says nothing.

6:45 A.M. — Our bus finally arrives. We load in and try to get ourselves comfortable. We have a three-hour drive ahead of us to Naval Air Facility, El Centro. The instructor says firmly, “I suggest you guys

stay awake and get to know your partner. After all, you will be living together for the next week.”

As soon as the instructor leaves, everyone simultaneously turns their head and closes their eyes. I follow suit. After all, we’ll probably need as much sleep as possible.

10 A.M. — We arrive at a small building on top of a hill in the middle of nowhere. We pile out, stretch our legs, get five Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs) for the week and head straight into another classroom to begin training. We sit through different Powerpoint presentations including Desert Hazards, shelters and night signals, medicine, radio procedures, and water survival.

“Are you getting all this?” I jokingly ask my NavTeam partner, Dan.

“This is just refresher,” he replies.

I soon find out that he is stationed with FASO and is going through this class so he can then be an instructor next time. I then found out he has spent most of his naval career with the Marine’s Fleet Marine Force (FMF), has gone through much harder courses and been through a ton of rougher exercises than this. I begin to feel a little better, knowing that at least Dan knows what he’s doing. I doubt Dan feels as good as I do about his partner.

I’m sure he has it set in his mind I’m not going to make it.

I hope he’s wrong.

4 P.M. — We finish class training and begin our first night of survival. Dan and I were given two sections of parachute and told to go build a shelter for the night. We have only a few more hours before nightfall so we have to hurry. I follow Dan’s lead and try not to look like that one-legged guy again.

We dig a ditch about 18 inches deep and tie the two pieces of parachute above. It looks great. I think back to one of the lectures we heard in class about shelters; blends in, low to the ground, irregular shape, small and secluded (BLISS). It passes.

We then take our MREs and Dan shows me how to break them down. Splitting up the different rations and placing them in the different pockets of my flight suit, I realize that my weight has just increased. I’m not upset though. I could be eating scorpions, lizards and snakes if this was a matter of life-and-death. There aren’t too many fast food joints in the desert.

8 P.M. — We take on the confidence course. We muster outside the building which is bright enough to be a beacon.

The mission: navigate to four different points in the desert. I think it’s more of a test for them to make sure we don’t end up in Mexico. Either way, Dan and I make it through just fine.

“So how far did we walk?” I ask Dan, thinking we walked about five miles.

“About three clicks,” he says.

“So that’s about five miles, right?”

“Not quite,” he replies. “More like almost two.”

DAY TWO — TUESDAY

6:30 A.M. — I survived the first night; somewhat. It was quite an experience sleeping in a hole in the ground with temperatures getting down to about 40 degrees, and nothing for warmth but a cheap space blanket.

“These shelters are meant more for survival in the desert sun,” said Dan. “For the rest of the week we’ll be running at night and sleeping during the day. Trust me, you won’t be cold the rest of the time here.”

I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.

7:30 A.M. — After a quick wash up, I shake my boots for scorpion extraction and put them on. We have a full day of classes ahead of us. We listen to survival lectures about getting medicine from



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Top – DEST students practice firing personal flares into the sky. In a real-life situation, these flares would be used to help the rescue team find the exact location of a survivor.

Above – Sleeping can be a challenge in itself while trying to acclimate to the heat. HM2(FMF) Dan Garner attempts to cover his eyes while trying to remain as comfortable as possible in a hole in the dirt. He, and the other students, need as much sleep as possible to conserve energy for the night of running and hiding that lies ahead of them.

Right – The students of DEST relax as much as they can to build energy before the sun sets. They will need it in the days to come.

plants, catching food, getting water and evading the enemy.

12:30 P.M. – We break for lunch. Maybe I shouldn't have had such a big dinner last night. I realize I have to ration better if I'm going to have enough food to last the rest of the week. Oh well, I've been meaning to go on a diet anyway.

5 P.M. – Classes are over. It seemed to me like that was a test in survival in itself. Now, to get ready for the exercise. We are given a radio and spare battery, extra water bottle, emergency flares, glow sticks and an emergency strobe light. I just gained another five pounds.

8 P.M. – Our mission begins. We are told board the two SH-60 *Seahawks*, which bear an awfully close resemblance to two white vans. To keep things interesting, we put on blindfolds on and wait as the "*Seahawks* fly" across the desert.

8:30 P.M. – Before we know it, our "*Seahawk*" lands, doors open, a NavTeam jumps out and the "*Seahawk*" takes off for another quarter mile. Next thing we know, it's our turn. I take off my blindfold and get out. We are tossed a gigantic parachute and left in the dust as our "*Seahawk*" disappears in the distance. Dan and I scoop up the parachute between us and start to run into the night. My heart is racing. There seems to be gunfire coming from everywhere. People are yelling, and we keep running. I am having a hard time keeping up. Dan turns and asks if I'm all right.

"Yeah," I gasp as I almost trip over a bush.

Then all of a sudden, the sky lights up, bright as day.

"Get down," Dan whispers firmly to me. "It's a flare. Just stay still until it goes out."

I'm glad, too, because I can take a short break from running. Then I hear them. Feet. From the corner of my eye, I see two instructors (the enemy) not even

20 feet away. I hold my breath and stay as still as possible. They walk by without noticing us at all. The flare goes out. Dan and I get up and start running again.

9:30 P.M. – We made it. So far. We get far enough that we can finally rest a little without worrying about the flares. Dan grabs a shirt from his pack and rolls the parachute inside. He ties the ends together and then to the top of his pack. We then break out the radio.

"Eagle-one, Eagle-one, this is Delta-two," whispers Dan into the receiver.

He has an earphone connected to minimize noise that might give us away. They talk back-and-forth, giving lingo we memorized earlier. We are given coordinates to a new location and then sign off. I put the radio away and break out the map and compass. We have to figure out where we are by triangulation.

"We set the map to match our compass to North," whispered Dan. "Then we find three landmarks on the map that we can see and figure what degree they are from us."

"We then make lines on the map with string, and where the lines intersect is our approximate location," Dan adds (The reason for using string instead of writing on the map is in case of capture, the enemy won't know where we've been).

We now have just three small problems — we're in the middle of the desert, it's pitch black and there aren't too many landmarks to triangulate off of — even if

we could see them.

9:45 – Fortunately, we find three landmarks, figure out our location and track down where we need to go to get to our objective. With time to spare before the enemy comes back on us again.

"So how far is it?" I ask Dan. "We'll go about eight clicks and retriangulate, but we're probably not farther than 10 clicks," he reply's like it's a good thing.

I've decided not to ask him how far again.

DAY THREE — WEDNESDAY

2 A.M. – After a few stops and changes in directions to avoid capture, we finally make our objective — a large marker with two five-gallon jugs of water for each team. I'm excited, not only because I made it without having to dump my camera gear or have Dan place an IV in my arm, but also because we made it before half of the other teams made it.

"We did good, Dan, didn't we?" I cheerfully say to him.

"Yep. We did. Now let's go dig a hole," he reminds me.

4:30 A.M. – We picked a spot a few hundred yards from the water drop and close to some bushes. We took turns digging and when we had it deep enough, cut the parachute into four triangular pieces. Three go on top of the hole. Each level shades the sun twice as much, and the reason for having them separated is

for the breeze to keep the hot air flowing. The hole also keeps cooler air in and hotter air out. The larger piece of chute is used to line the inside to give some kind of feeling of comfort. It looked great and very enticing after a long night. We both crawled in and almost immediately fell asleep.

12:30 P.M. – "It's hot," I thought to myself.

Soon after, Dan looks at the little thermometer in his pack and says, "It's 90 degrees. Not bad considering it's about 105 outside." The parachutes make that much of a difference.

This could mean life or death in a real-life situation. We learned in class that the human body takes much longer to adapt to a hot weather environment (seven to 14 days) than to adapt to cold weather (three to 10 days). If we don't stay in the shade and drink tons of water throughout the day and night, we could get seriously dehydrated in a hurry. I keep a watchful eye for the signs that I may be dehydrated and keep drinking.

6 P.M. – We broke camp, took down the parachute, filled the hole, and made the site look like we were never there. Sanitizing the area keeps the enemy from knowing where we were. As I took the almost empty jugs of water back to the drop off point, I started feeling that pain that was trying to get my attention the night before.



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Top – SGT Moses Welborn and GMG1(SWCC) Christopher Velasco look over their map and try to decide what action they will be taking next. From this point on, they have to be extremely careful as to the use of a flashlight. In the desert, the light from a cigarette lighter can be seen for miles.

Above – Getting as much sleep as they can, DEST students find the most unusual ways of getting comfortable on a bus during the three-hour drive to Naval Air Facility, El Centro, Calif.

Right – Chasing the sun, HM2(FMF) Dan Garner begins his night walking to a good location away from possible aggressors trying to capture him. He will then find a bush to hide under until he can establish communications for directions to his next destination.

“Boy am I sore,” I say to Dan.

“You better not be,” said Dan. “I have a funny feeling we’ll be doing a lot more walking tonight.”

He hands me two of the four pieces of parachute to carry. Now my weight has gone from 25 pounds to probably more than 40 pounds.

8 P.M. – Dan was right. After calling in, we found our new objective was all the way around Superstition Mountain. I didn’t want to ask, but I had to.

“How far, Dan?”

“Oh, about 13 clicks if we keep close to the mountain, but there’s a lot of dried up river beds, so it’ll probably be slow. You ready?”

I nod a sluggish, “yes,” and we get up to go.

10 P.M. – Since we knew there would probably be a lot of enemy activity around our area, we decided to find a nice bush to hide under until it settled down. It was a good thing, too, because they were all around us before we knew it. Flares launched every five minutes and lit the ground forever.

“Close one eye when you look at them,” explained Dan. “That way, you don’t lose your night vision.” I wish he had told me that when the first one was launched. It felt like hours before I could see without that black dot floating in my view where the flare used to be.

11 P.M. – We started moving, but after a half an hour, Dan had a hunch. We ran under a large shrub and waited for about five minutes. Sure enough, out of nowhere a large truck came up over a hill.

“My legs are hanging out,” I whisper to Dan.

“You’re OK, he replied. “Just don’t move. They can’t see as well as you can see them because of the lights.”

They passed by only yards away. I began to breathe again.

DAY FOUR — THURSDAY

2:30 A.M. – We’ve been walking non-stop through terrain I would consider hard to maneuver in bright daylight. We’ve had a few close calls with the “enemy” and I’m feeling very down. Aside from carrying my extra camera gear,

I am doing the same thing other Sailors have done before me, but they were in real-life situations with real enemies. But, that’s what these students are here for. Whatever the situation, this training prepares Sailors for the worst.

5:30 A.M. – We finally made it to our objective — water. Without a word, we search for a good spot and start digging. Our bodies are on automatic and we both know the sooner we get this hole dug and the shelter made; the sooner we can rest.

NOON – I’m feeling very sore and have a ton of blisters on my feet. I also feel like I’m sweating more than I can drink. I’m hungry, and I’m down to two MRE rations left.

5 P.M. – “Last stretch,” I say to myself, but I know this has to be the hardest of it all. I try not to get depressed. We break camp, and find a safe hiding spot.

8 P.M. – Sure enough, we find our last stretch means going around to the other side of the mountain. We head off. The flares seem to be coming down one right after another. We decide to take a short detour to avoid capture once again. It takes us at least a couple miles away from where we are supposed to be, but it’s better than the alternative, capture, harassment and a drive back to our camp to start over.

DAY FIVE — FRIDAY

3:30 A.M. – We made it! This is it. The real last stretch. All we have to do now is wait for our rescue. The rest of the NavTeams are there and we talk about our evasions and near captures.

6 A.M. – I don’t know what’s better, walking all night and keeping warm, or standing for hours and freezing. Then we see it – that distant signal for us to make our way in.

6:45 A.M. – We make it to our mark and in keeping with the exercise, we are placed face down in the sand and individually asked personal questions that we previously wrote the answers to on the first day. This is a standard procedure to make sure we are who we say we are. All of it was serious until one of the Sailors is asked what his cat’s name is.

He replied, “My cat’s name is Fluffy.”

The whole group breaks into laughter and gives a big sigh that the exercise is about over.

7:30 A.M. – We met up at a lookout station and were bused back to our original class area where bottles of Gatorade and muffins waited for us. Then we got on the bus and headed back.

NOON – Arrived back at NAS North Island. We definitely look the way we feel

– smelly, dirty and tired. We got off the bus and shuffled into the classroom. We lined up and received our certificates, stating we have successfully completed the Desert Environmental Survival Training course. I look at my certificate with a big smile.

I made it.

The fortunate thing for me is that I may never have to worry about relying on this training again. As for the others, there is a greater possibility. The missions these Sailors take may bring them to foreign lands and foreign deserts, and hopefully they will come back without harm. But, if they do become stranded, what they learned at DEST will keep them alive.

I turned to my partner and said, “Thanks Dan, I doubt I would have made it without your help.”

He replied, “No problem Aaron, You did good. I’d make you my Nav partner any day.”

I told him thanks again and left.

Next objective; taking a shower. 📷

Ansarov is a San Diego-based photojournalist assigned to All Hands.

